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Combining conservation and community development: An example from Málaga, Spain

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ABSTRACT

A case study of the impact of changing architectural conservation policy in Andalucía, southern Spain is examined. The example highlights a fundamental issue of contemporary debate on cities, namely the future of residential and non-monumental buildings that, nevertheless, represent a distinctive genre of building typology but which are frequently judged to be unsuitable for contemporary housing needs and aspirations. An historical but rapidly disappearing Andalusian residential building type – the corral or corralón – is identified and its traditional features described. This residential type continues to play a particularly significant role in housing the elderly. The measures taken by various departments of the Málaga city local authority to not only conserve examples of this distinctive architectural type but also to link this to community development through various measures of enhancement of community cohesion are examined and assessed.

Keywords: Corralón, community development, conservation, elderly, typological form.

INTRODUCTION

A recent review of United States and Spanish housing policy in relation to elderly people concluded rather patronisingly that “..lessons from the American experience..can expand housing policies in Spain.” (Jiménez and Koebel, 2007). It is the contention of this paper that the reverse is equally true, particularly in relation to the role of community in ‘successful’ ageing. The role of the built environment in helping to support or even shape communities and their effective functioning is well recognised in the literature, albeit in a contested fashion (Lozano 1990; Cuba and Hummon 1993; Talen 1999). This short paper reports on a preliminary investigation of a municipal scheme by the city of Málaga to combine the conservation of a historically distinctive typological form of multi-family housing with the enhancement of the community residing there.

In the present context, community development refers to a conscious process of change in the relationship between ordinary people (in this case mainly elderly) and people in power, a change in favour of the

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former in terms of recognition of their values and priorities. This includes the community's perception of the value of their neighbourhood and its built environment. However, this community enhancement is as much psychological as material and is based on the recognition of the intimate relationship between people and place at the micro-scale and of the role of the emotional dimension in community development (Ayuntamiento de Málaga 2004; Hoggett and Miller 2000). As part of this process, a section of society that was traditionally marginal has been given a voice and the opportunity to demonstrate its cultural norms and expressions. But an integral part of this particular example is that a form of housing provision that was widely believed to have outlived its usefulness, has been renovated and celebrated as representing community cohesion.

Although a specific example, and therefore limited in scale, the initiative discussed here is of wider interest in that it represents a significant change in conservation policy that is not just limited to the city of Málaga. Along with many other European countries, for many years conservation policy in Spain was dominated by a 'monumentalist' perspective, that is, the focus of policy was concentrated on individual 'great' buildings – castles, palaces, convents and, especially, cathedrals (González Pérez, 2007). A somewhat different perspective on urban conservation is one where the emphasis moves on from conventional 'expert' value judgements of important architectural elements to a recognition of the wider social and cultural grounding of those elements. In so doing, the range of elements to be considered as 'important' is broadened considerably, as is the elitist conception of what is 'worthy' (Zanchetti and Jokilehto 1997). A genuinely sustainable approach to conservation can only be achieved and have meaning where it is reinforced by the community's interest, support and values. This paper is therefore concerned with an illustration of expanding the scope of conventional urban conservation policy away from a concentration on individual structures and their perceived dominant role in representing cultures and societies to one based much more on the recognition of the cultural identity of societies themselves. It is concerned with a philosophical shift from a conservation approach that tends "...to treat townscape as art rather than as a setting for everyday life." (Hubbard 1993).

The concept of area based conservation has been relatively slow to develop in Spain as has the notion that structures other than grand buildings are worthy of conservation. More recently, however, evidence of changes in approach and a broadening of perspective in relation to heritage and its conservation has become apparent (Pickard 2002; González Pérez 2007). An example is the enthusiasm with which regional and local authorities have embraced the declaration of conjuntos histórico-artístico (broadly similar to conservation areas in Britain, a trend that has been described as the emergence of la cultura de la recuperación urbana (Martínez 2001). In addition to this stimulus to area-based conservation, a range of administrative and legal instruments at different scales have emerged (Pol 1998) and there have been some notable successes in the rehabilitation and recovery of historic centres (Pol 1989). Changes in the approach to urban conservation are indicated by the development of techniques such as the recognition of 'character areas' or morphological regions within cities (Barke 2003) but the growth of more flexible approaches has also been stimulated by the recognition of important functional changes in the role of city centres themselves (Calle Vaquero and García Hernandez 1998). The essential preliminary tool for conservation policy in Spain is the Plan General de Ordenación Municipal (General Plan for Municipal Development) but within the framework established by this are contained other plans, most importantly for conservation are Planes Especiales (Special Plans) dealing, amongst other things, with measures to protect historic areas (González-Pérez, 2007). Such measures include different levels of protection for areas and individual structures. In the case of Málaga there are four such levels. Protección integral refers to buildings with architectural features that must be retained in their entirety due to their unique and monumental character, Protección Arquitectónica (Grado 1) concerns buildings of special architectural value that must be totally retained but minor modifications may be made to ensure their continued occupancy, Protección Arquitectónica (Grado 2) includes buildings of lesser architectural value in their totality but which contain elements that should be preserved even if renovation takes place, and Protección de Conjunto concerns historic districts of the city where special preservation measures

operate (Plan General de Ordenación Urbanística de Málaga, 2007a). Within the framework of the Plan General de Ordenación Municipal a catalogue of buildings and areas to be so protected must be drawn up (and also for archaeological sites and gardens/green areas of special interest), specifying the detailed characteristics of the buildings and the features that must be retained (Plan General de Ordenación Urbanística de Málaga, 2007b).

CORRALES IN ANDALUCÍA

The following observations are based on extensive fieldwork in the city of Málaga including interviews held with residents in three different examples of the housing type which forms the subject matter of the paper, the Corralón de Santa Sofía and Corralón de la Aurora, both in the Trinidad barrio of the city, and the Corral de Dos Puertas in the Capuchinos district. Interviews took the form of semi-structured conversations with groups of (mainly) elderly residents, focussing on their residential history, their feelings about the community and their relationships with the city authorities. Representatives of the city's Concejalía de Bienestar Social (Department of Social Welfare) and Gerencia Municipal de Urbanismo, Obras e Infraestructuras (Planning Department) were also interviewed at approximately the same time (April, 2010). Interviews with the latter were principally concerned with their strategies towards the three areas in terms of architectural conservation and community development.

The housing form under consideration is known in Spanish as a corral, corralón or patio de vecino (neighbourhood yard) (Plate 1) and is claimed to date back as far as the 14th century (Montoto y Raustenstrauch 1981). Their main feature is an open space blocked off at one end to form a patio at the centre of which was usually a water source, either a fountain or a well available for use by all residents. Surrounding the patio, on two or more levels, were small single-storey dwellings (often comprising no more than two rooms). The number of dwellings varied substantially, depending on the dimensions of the plot upon which the corral was built. Typically, the upper storey included a wooden veranda with railings, usually decorated with plants and flowers. Each dwelling normally housed no more than one family but, though families lived separately, a key feature of the corral was the sharing of communal services, such as lavatories and a washing area, normally located on the ground floor.

These corrales were particularly associated with households working in trades such as bricklaying, carpentry, blacksmithing, weaving, whitewashing, carting, washing, ironing, dress-making and cobbling. Their residents were essentially working-class (Morales Padrón 1974). The corral itself was often the location for the practice of such activities and neighbours would constitute a significant proportion of the customers. The corral was not only the place of work for many but also the place where a whole range of social and cultural activities took place. These included baptisms and wakes enacted for the dead but also events such as impromptu musical performances. Thus the corral was not just a place to live but a form of housing that demanded close social relations and mutually supportive coexistence with the patio functioning as the geographical and social centre for the community. It has been claimed that the psychology of living within a corral was a unique combination of that of the dwelling itself and a small barrio (neighbourhood) (Morgado Giraldo 1993).



Plate 1: Corralón de Santa Sofía, Málaga (author's photograph)

Most corrales in the past had a casera or caretaker (usually female) who represented the owner of the properties (Carloni 1981). The casera would be responsible for the routine opening and shutting of the complex, for collecting rents and for dealing with persistent debtors. The caretaker also resolved disputes between residents and determined the responsibilities for performing tasks within the communal areas, for example cleaning the patio, the street door, preparing the internal patio lights or extracting water for washing clothes or hygienic purposes. She/he also often had the delegated power to admit and expel residents of the corral (Morales Padrón 1974).

In the second half of the 20th century many corrales started to disappear (García Gómez 1997). For example, in Seville in 1873 there were well over 200, a figure reduced to 81 by the end of the twentieth century. In Málaga the recorded figure of 120 in the first decade of the twentieth century fell to just over 20 in 2009. The general perception of them as slum areas was the most common rationale for the closure and subsequent clearance of many (Plate 2). Ironically, other corrales have fundamentally changed their character and resident population through processes of gentrification (Salinas 2003). However, in Málaga at least the Ayuntamiento (City Hall) has, through the Concejalía de Bienestar Social (Department of Social Welfare) and councillors representing specific barrios of the city's historic centre, sought to preserve this material context of a traditional way of life. But equally important as this building conservation policy is the enhanced support for the many positive features which the communal way of life in the corrales has to offer. The city officials interviewed confirmed that physical regeneration has been accompanied by a commitment to retain and foster what is considered to be a positive social model, with the intention of dealing with one of the most significant contemporary social problems, that is, providing appropriate residential accommodation for the elderly.



Plate 2: Derelict corral, No. 18, Calzada Trinidad, Málaga (author's photograph)

THE CORRALÓN DE SANTA SOFÍA

A specific example concerns the Corralón de Santa Sofía in the Trinidad district of the city, in Calle Montes de Oca (Plate 1). This deteriorating complex of fifty dwellings was acquired and completely renovated by the Ayuntamiento through its Instituto Municipal de Vivienda (Municipal Housing Institute) and subsequently, in 2007, the Ayuntamiento took the unprecedented step of listing the Corralón in its Plan General de Obras y Urbanismo (PGOU) (General Plan of Works and Urban Development) under its section of preserved buildings. As noted earlier, this was somewhat unusual as the type of buildings included in such a Plan was normally restricted to churches, convents, town halls, etc. But before this recognition of architectural distinctiveness, on completion of the renovation the Corralón was made available to some eighty rent-paying senior citizens, many of them previous residents, who now enjoy excellent facilities in homes which, albeit small, include lounge, kitchen, bedroom and bathroom. Interestingly, the City Hall's original idea was, in line with the traditional construction of corrales, to provide common areas for all residents, including kitchens, dining rooms and washrooms. However, in a significant act of empowerment of the residents, a consultation process carried out by the Department of Social Welfare established that it was more important to respect the independence of each tenant, but provide support services (meals, cleaning, hygiene etc) for the more frail and needy residents via their network of social workers. The typical profile of one of these residents is: a widowed female of around 70 years old, on a state pension and with restricted mobility (though access is certainly not limited to females). The interviewees were keen to record that their sense of 'neighbourliness' had not declined as a result of the

modernisation of the Corralón and noted that, whilst the character of the built environment (Plate 1) remained fundamental to 'everyday' social interaction, its modernisation had enhanced their sense of dignity and a range of other developments had served to promote an even greater level of community cohesion. The Corralón now has a gym and a variety of excursions are held each year. Interviewees observed that virtually all the residents participate in these activities and particularly popular are the in situ ceramic classes and painting lessons. Opportunities exist to sell the products of these activities. A doctor visits each week and there are two cleaning women for the communal areas.

Therefore, despite the fact that residents live independently in their own homes, and that some of the traditional communal areas have not been reinstated (for example, shared toilets), this does not mean that the old way of life has disappeared altogether. Communal ways of life are more common and probably valued more in Andalucía than in northern Europe. Accordingly, the Ayuntamiento, in the form of the Concejalía de Bienestar Social has recognised the importance of encouraging participation in celebrations and events that historically have been important manifestations of identity but which may be recognised as adding new meaning to a community (Hustedde and King 2002). Support has therefore extended beyond the conventional in situ provision of services for the elderly as described above and has consciously sought to reinforce a sense of identity and cultural worth. A notable example of this is the annual *Semana Popular* (People's Week) held in late May or early June, in which not only residents from other corralones in the area but also any other malagueños (residents of the city of Málaga), and even interested tourists are invited to participate (Sur, 2010). In 2011 the Ayuntamiento sponsored the seventh event in the series entitled *Semana Popular de los Corralones Trinidad Perchel*. This is part of a wider scheme known as the *Proyecto de Desarrollo Comunitario* (Community Development Plan) for the districts of south Trinidad and north Perchel, sponsored by the City Hall's Centre for Social Services (Centre District). Over the seven years of its existence, this initiative to add cultural to architectural regeneration has developed strongly and now encompasses a varied diet of activities for all tastes and ages. While sheer enjoyment is obviously a vital aim of this event, the officials interviewed confirmed that the *Semana* also has significant social and educational aims. As well as the desire to promote social cohesion and community solidarity the intention is also to try and pass on to younger generations a sense of the cultural values embodied in this traditional form of semi-communal living within the corralones.

An important element in the *Semana*, designed to encourage maximum participation by the residents, is the various concursos (competitions). The major one is the *Concurso de Engalanamento* (Embellishment Competition) for streets, patios and balconies, which in the course of the week are decorated with flowers, plants and other ornamental features (Plate 3). This is in fact a revival of a practice that flourished in the early 20th century up to the Civil War (Mateo Aviles 1995). In 2008 nearly 50 patios were involved in this competition and the total number of participants was 2,600. It should be noted that not all of these were traditional corrales and included patios within modern apartment buildings but several of the elderly residents interviewed in the Corralón de Santa Sofía and Corralón de Aurora noted with delight the adoption of 'their' traditions by residents of new residential blocks. Among other competitions organised are photography, traditional cooking and flamenco dancing. The respondents interviewed were all aware of the strategy of the organisers to use these competitions to encourage residents to make permanent improvements to their corralones and enhance their knowledge of their history and cultural richness, but all commented positively on their impact. In addition to a procession through the streets of the area to launch the *Semana*, a number of major cultural events are held, including performances by local choirs, a flamenco concert, and a Hip-Hop concert. Various types of standing exhibitions are also staged, including, for example, old photographs and plans of the corralones in former times. The locally hand crafted ceramics and paintings are also on sale. Another feature of the celebrations is the various workshops (*talleres*) organised to give participants hands-on experience in various fields, such as traditional games, mural painting and making puppets. A number of these are specifically geared to children, including the very youngest. Guided walking tours, aimed especially at schoolchildren and interested groups outside Trinidad-Perchel, also play an important part in the week's programme.

Parallel with these activities in the corralones themselves, educational talks, centred on various aspects of traditional life in these unique urban environments, are given in local schools (Málaga Hoy 2009).



Plate 3: Patio del Montes, No. 19, Calle Fuentecillas (author's photograph)

The Semana Popular, though clearly the most important, is not the only initiative of this kind organised during the year by the Ayuntamiento. For example, at Christmas the same protagonists participate, albeit on a rather smaller scale, in another week of activities entitled 'Navidad en los corralones'. The decoration of corralones, patios and streets - including the creation of traditional Christmas belenes (cribs/nativity scenes) - is a vital element in this celebration. Once again concursos are organised to encourage participation plus a range of both passive and active cultural events (Sur 2008). As with the Semana Popular a major aim is to bring old traditions and modes of living back to life in a modernised setting.

CONCLUSION

Despite its success and the successful renovation of several other corrales, the degree to which the experience of the Corralón de Santa Sofía could be repeated in all of Málaga's remaining corrales is questionable. There are less than 20 corrales left within the city and, as most are privately owned and relatively centrally located, they are highly vulnerable to wholesale redevelopment in order to capitalise on the value of their sites. The Ayuntamiento simply does not have the means to intervene in every case

as it did in the Corralón de Santa Sofía. In addition, there is no doubt that the distinctive architecture of Santa Sofía was a major factor in this intervention. Not many surviving corrales provide such a classic example of the genre and would win support for their conservation. Many surviving corrales are small in size and, as pointed out somewhat ruefully but not resentfully by an interviewee at the Corral de Dos Puertas (11 dwellings) in Calle Rosal Blanco (Plate 4), do not offer the economies of scale and the suitability for conversion for senior citizens or other groups as did the Corralón de Santa Sofía and Corralón de Aurora.



Plate 4: Corral de Dos Puertas, No. 7, Calle Rosal Blanco, Málaga (author's photograph)

However, a clear sign that the Ayuntamiento remains committed to the socio-spatial residential environment model represented by corrales is indicated by the creation of modern ones, albeit designed in the traditional style, in the redevelopment of the El Bulto district to the south of Trinidad. Of the 92 dwellings in two redeveloped blocks, each built around a 'modern' corral, 25 are occupied by residents from the old corralones of Salitre and Plaza de Toros Vieja which had been demolished in this redevelopment. The inhabitants of these new developments are enthusiastic participants in the Semana Popular.

In several ways, therefore, the Málaga Ayuntamiento is seeking to rescue and regenerate at least one component of declining urban areas. In the case of the Corralón de Santa Sofía it has not only conserved a distinctive architectural form but also, to a large extent, managed to reinvigorate a traditional way of life, albeit in a modified form more suited to the present day; and it has responded to an obvious social need, particularly among its senior citizens.

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